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ABSTRACT

The practices of Reconstructive Reflective Teaching as discussed in the works of Schon, Smyth, and others can provide sound staff development for teachers at all grade levels, kindergarten through college. This review of the literature on the topic provides a definition and a detailed explanation of the assumptions, preconditions, and processes of Reconstructive Reflective Teaching. The article concludes with a discussion of the benefits of the implementation of Reflective Teaching in schools, benefits that accrue to administration, faculty, students, and community. (Author)

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Reconstructive Reflective Teaching:

A Review of the Literature

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Reconstructive Reflective Teaching:

A Review of the Literature

"We do not need new information. We need time to think about the information we have." Ann E. Berthoff

In the past decade the paradigms of Reflective professional practice have begun to change the way educators view the process of education. Rooted in the normative philosophies of Friere and Dewey (Smyth, 1989), and first articulated by Schon (1983), Reconstructive Reflective teaching, especially, seems to hold the most promise for reform and renewal in the American educational establishment. Focused on change and commitment, Reconstructive Reflective teaching could substantially improve our educational institutions in the area of staff development.

Proponents of the movement argue that Reconstructive Reflective teaching will empower teachers and further professionalize the teaching profession, allowing teachers to challenge school bureaucracies and reclaim ownership of educational practices and goals (Schon, 1983, 1987; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Bulloch, 1989; Smyth, 1989). The definition, assumptions, preconditions, process, impediments to, and results of Reflective Teaching are discussed in this paper.

Reflective Teaching Defined

The definition of Reconstructive Reflective Teaching has expanded, beginning with the work of Dewey and culminating in Schon's discussion, which includes purposeful goals for social change. John Dewey's early definition of reflection is:

> Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it. [Reflection] also involved a state of doubt, perplexity. . . in which thinking originates and an act of searching. . . inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity (Bulloch, 1989).9-12).

Although Donald Schon did not refer directly to Dewey's definition when he published his seminal work in the field of reflection in 1983, The Reflective Practitioner, this later researcher defines the process similarly. Schon describes reflection as a way of attending to the problems of practice, allowing oneself to become confused and open to new possibilities during the process of attending, then giving shape to those problems in order to discover new ways of both acknowledging one's own responses, seeing, and implementing solutions (pp. 49, 61).

The definition of Reflective Teaching Practice evolved further in the 1987 adaptation of his work for the field of education when Schon added the element of artistry. He discusses the necessity for educators, especially, to have a sense of artistry, a kind of intuitive knowledge drawn from both experience and research. Artistry enables the educator to effectively frame the problems encountered in practice and to become willing to risk improvising at all levels of the reflective process, from defining the problem to implementing the solution (p. 4).

The definition had already reached its present, normative form in 1983, however, when Schon included the broad purpose of achieving social justice, a focus reiterated throughout his later work (1987). This view is echoed by Grimmett (1989) and Bulloch (1989). Grimmett describes Reconstructive Reflective practice as a process that allows teachers to confront the "social, political, and cultural conditions" prohibiting self knowledge, for the goal of achieving human freedom (p. 28). Bulloch invokes Dewey's commitment to a democratic society in order to support his own assertion that reflective practice must have social goals and must be grounded in an explicit view of society, society as a democratic community (p. 16).

Besides revising society, Reconstructive Reflective

teaching and the writing that often occurs with this educational practice allow the teacher to revise or re-see her view of herself and her basic beliefs about practice. She learns to achieve, through the process, a new understanding of herself as an educator within the context of her culture (Grimmett, 1989, p. 22). Writings, including personal experience, autobiography, journals, narratives, and more are central to the personal level of Reconstructive Reflection (p. 23).

When teachers reconstruct their previous beliefs about teaching and about themselves, they also gain new understandings of the ways in which political and cultural conditions limit educational practice and marginalize certain groups of students (Grimmett, 1989, p. 23).

Assumptions About Reflective Teaching

Major assumptions informing Reconstructive Reflective teaching concern language, ethics, and values. Reflective teachers share the belief that knowledge is socially constructed (Ross, 1989), and that language is the primary agent in creating and shaping that knowledge (Henderson, 1989, p. 10). Since knowledge about practice is the chief reality for the teacher, this reality must be addressed, "named and framed" as Schon says (1983, p. 40) within the

specific social and institutional context of the classroom setting. Talk, negotiation, and writing about these realities, the knowledge of classroom events, create a fabric of meaning for teachers (Berger & Luckman, 1966, pp. 14, 23).

The second assumption is that while reflective teachers address the realities of the classroom situation, talking, writing and thinking about these elements, they must also attend to the ethical considerations implicit in the processes of reflection. The acts of defining, hypothesizing, and improvising about problems of practice involve choices that must be made rationally and responsibly (Bulloch, 1989, p. 20). Teachers are obligated to note the possible effects of discovered solutions for students, colleagues, the institution, and the public.

The third assumption of reflective practice is that improvisations and choices made and implemented in practice will be congruent with basic values of the educator: learning, respect for students, and the fostering of community (Bulloch, 1989, p. 17).

Conditions for Reflective Teaching

In addition to specific, shared assumptions, certain preconditions, especially a supportive environment and the

process of dialogue, are also necessary for Reconstructive Reflective teaching to be practiced. The supportive environment encourages purposeful, discovery-oriented dialogue among teachers, teaches and administrators, and teachers and students (Schon, 1987; Nolan, 1989; Henderson, 1989). To be effective, the dialogue must deal with the affective dimensions of practice. Dialogue that acknowledges the emotional dimensions of specific classroom and institutional problems consists of nondefensive language that recognizes and names feelings of confusion, frustration, and/or loss of control of the situation (Schon, 1987, pp. 163-166).

The dialogues themselves, the shared language, either verbal or written, will develop as a significant means by which both faculty and administrators can learn to see that the confusions and problems of practice are legitimate objects of reflection and that the language that shapes these problems and their solutions is negotiable. The elements of negotiability and choice inherent in language and problem-solving empowers faculty members to act collaboratively with colleagues, administrators, and students in processes of shared discovery (Smyth, 1989, p. 5).

Procedures for Reflective Teaching

Specific procedures for the practice of Reconstructive Reflective Teaching are amply described in the literature on the topic. Whether focused either on the immediate problems of the classroom or on the broader concerns of institutional and social goals, the process of reflection is similar in both cases.

The reflective teacher attends to these problems in a sequence of recognitions, experiment, and change. The teacher begins by recognizing a problematic or puzzling situation in the classroom, a student or a group of students who are confused, purposeless, or otherwise not engaged in learning (Henderson, 1989). The teacher then acknowledges her own feelings of surprise and confusion as she recognizes the similarities and differences between this particular situation and other classroom situations. The teacher then frames the situation by describing it and asking herself: "What is this?" and, the next important question, "How have I been thinking about it? What values and practices led to it?"

Smyth (1989) describes other questions that may further guide the process of self confrontation:

> What do my teaching practices say about my values and beliefs about teaching?

Where did my beliefs originate?

What social practices result from these beliefs?

Why do I continue to hold these beliefs?

Are they exclusive or democratic?

What views of power do they imply?

What particular group's interest is advanced by my practices?

What limits my beliefs about what is possible in teaching? (7).

This process of questioning one's assumptions helps the teacher to think about her own thinking that resulted in the situation, and then to revise her previous assumptions, that is, to reconstruct her thinking, eventually asking herself "How can I do this differently?" (Smyth, 1989, pp. 5, 6, 7). The teacher then improvises and experiments, trying different solutions (Schon, 1987, p. 28).

By this means, the reflective teacher skeptically confronts not only her teaching practice, but the conditions that shape the practice. Reflection empowers her to learn to understand better both the practice and how beliefs and values cause us to invest the events of the practice with certain significances (Smyth, 1989, p. 4).

For instance, a teacher who is continually urged by parents and administrators to raise the standardized test

scores of her students might reflect and write a classroom journal entry on the very system of accountability that she is being exhorted to embrace. She might think in a new way about her own assumptions about this system as an inevitable part of the educational system, and, she might eventually question whether or not that inevitability was, in fact, really so.

She might then check the research on the topic in the light of her own skepticism, where she would discover that the accountability movement developed from the Cult of Efficiency described by Callahan (1962) in his book of the same name. As adapted by schools, the Cult of Efficiency resulted in the creation of the school organization and goals in the metaphor of the factory system.

Besides the accountability movement, other persistent effects of that metaphor are an emphasis on standardization, competitive processes, assessment, and the back to basics movement. The reflective teacher might question the applicability of such practices for an institution or organization whose goals are human learning rather than profitable production.

The teacher who clearly understands the goals and values of her profession is well equipped to adapt and create a practice that evidences these values. She does not

have to rely on the inconsistent and frequently inhumane purposes of political, social, and historical forces alien to these values. This teacher would be likely to emphasize in her classroom the practices that would result in higher level thinking skills, critical and abstract thought, and the increase in reasoning ability for her students rather than drill in rote, disconnected, test-oriented bits of information. The former practices would be more congruent with her educational values.

And the teacher who is a practiced writer of classroom journals, articles, and letters, is far better equipped to advocate the cause of educational values and goals to administrators, parents, and other teachers (Moffett, 1981, p. 93; Nolan, 1989, p. 36). She has a strong sense of her professional identity and a good grasp of her topic.

Barriers to Reflective Teaching

Numerous barriers to reflectivity in the classroom exist, however. Budget cuts, faculty turn-over, and traditional faculty autonomy can all prevent schools and colleges from forming the communities necessary to support productive reflection. The chief impediment to reflection, however, may be the back to basics, accountability and assessment movements that attempt to falsely persuade both

educators and the public that schools and teachers are the reason for the economic difficulties currently faced by the United States (Smyth, 1989, p. 3).

Conclusion

Despite these barriers, much about the practices of Reconstructive Reflective teaching recommend themselves as staff development for teachers at all levels, kindergarten through college. First, Reflective Teaching is inexpensive staff development (Cruickshank, 1987). Second, the experimentation and thought required by reflective teaching improves teaching and improves faculty attitudes about teaching. Teachers who reflect on their practices and the organizational and cultural contexts of practice gain a new sense of their identities as experts in their fields (Goswami & Stillman, 1987, preface). This stronger sense of identity enables teachers to become part of an intellectual community, itself a source of change and growth (Schon, 1987, pp. 342-343). The community theme of defining, experimenting with, and improving practice provides both unity and coherence to an otherwise fragmented school life. Finally, this reflective focus results in better curriculum and better education for all students, a legitimate social goal in and of itself (Schon, 1987, p. 543). Better

education may be the one social goal that can enable this country to survive and meet the challenges presented by other goals before us, especially the goal of social justice for an increasingly diverse population within the context of a democracy.

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Abstract

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